

**Governor's International Education Day 2005: Student Essay
Contest**

"Photographing my International Experience"

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Note: I decided to write this essay in the form of a letter to my Gogo. Gogo is the Zulu word for grandmother.

Dearest Gogo,

I wish that I had time to write to you more often. Rather, I wish that I made time to write more often for I must admit that how I spend my time is often a conscious choice that I make. It always seems that here there is so much to do in a single day that it's easy to lose track of time and find myself wishing that each day had more than just the allotted 24 hours. I find that every single second must be filled with some activity, Gogo, and there is so little time to just sit in silence and drink nothingness. Even when I sit with ladies as old as you are, it is hard to accommodate silence because in this culture, we are afraid of the gaps between sentences, terrified that if we stopped to listen to the pauses between we might actually hear some frightening truths.

Gogo, find enclosed some recent photographs. I'm sure that you must be wondering what I look like since it has been a full 3 and a half years since we last stood face to face. I tried to pick out a few that show what my day to day life is like.

There's one in there of me at work in my uniform (in addition to classes I have 2 jobs, this is the one I do most nights). It was difficult doing this job at first because, as you know, when I was at home I would never have dreamed of doing any kind of job where I had to wear a uniform. Now I wear one to work every day. And it's not even a clean one at that. It is covered with grease stains and you can tell just by looking at it that it has seen better days. I serve food to hostile, ill-mannered young people at the dining hall. Each night I do this for a couple of hours, keeping a smile on my face (for I am told I must always be polite and that the customer is always right, no matter how

rude they are). I guess eventually you forget the comforts you once knew because of the need to earn a penny or two since everything here is so expensive.

By the time I'm done with work, I just want to take a hot bath then curl up into my bed and sleep. I would if it weren't for the hours of studying ahead of me. In this particular photo you can see I'm trying to smile but failing miserably. My hair is in a mess and if you look hard enough you'll see a few wrinkles on my forehead. On this day I remember feeling particularly annoyed because this short, red-haired girl with a very loud voice thought it necessary to scold me for her cold food (as if I were personally responsible for the food's temperature). Another one, this one black or African American as they call themselves, complained about the lack of variety in the foods we serve. "How can you expect me to eat this rubbish?" she said to me. If only she knew about the millions who everyday go without even a portion of what she had on her plate--or maybe she does know but has managed to tuck this knowledge away neatly in the back of her head. It's so easy to do that here, Gogo. There is so much of everything that it is easy to forget those who have nothing. After everyone has eaten, we wash the dishes. Usually this is the most depressing part for me. We throw away so much uneaten food. It is as if people deliberately take more than they can stomach so that they can take pleasure in throwing the rest down the drain. Can you see the people in the background of the picture, Gogo? Those are some of my fellow workers. Most of us come from different countries (this work is a little too dirty for the locals, I suspect).

I digress though. This is, after all, one of many photographs I've sent. I'll allow the photographs to speak for themselves and whisper whatever messages they will. I

have to point out one other favorite though. I put it right at the back of the stack. It's a picture of me with my 9 housemates eating supper together. I'm not sure if Ma remembered to tell you about my living situation this year. I've been living in a huge old house with some friends in an intentional community. We cook and eat meals together every day and share household expenses. This has been a truly magnificent experience for me as I had been really missing the sense of community that I grew up with. I have memories of being at home, constantly surrounded by family and loved ones. There were always people living in our home besides Ma, Baba, the girls and I. We constantly had a steady flow of relatives, friends and other people in need passing through; and we enjoyed their company and they ours. Being here the last three years I've sensed that everyone wants their own space and no one wants to share their space with anyone else. Living with these people has been quite wonderful. It's done much to restore my faith in the goodness of people.

You'll notice, of course, that I'm the sole dark skinned person in the photograph, lost in a sea of white. This has been an adjustment I've slowly made. Sometimes I completely forget that I'm the only black person in miles but once in a while I'll look up and remember that I am indeed the only black person in a room. Strangely it doesn't frighten me as I once thought it would. It's funny how things change.

Anyway, Gogo, I hope you enjoy the pictures. I'll write again soon.

With love,

Your grandson Nkosi